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No Tin In This Ear

No one is more gracious than I about confessing and correcting error, but to have error unfairly imputed to me when every fact has been triply checked and verified as absolutely accurate . . . well, you know what Julius Caesar said about the sting of the adder's tooth: "I'm too old to cry and it hurts too much to laugh."

Yet here are these hundreds and hundreds of letters from musical people accusing me of error. And why? For reporting recently in this space that the K.G.B., waging its music war against the United States, had sawed the legs off Vladimir Horowitz's piano, thus compelling the great pianist "to lie flat on his stomach to play Beethoven's Eroica."

"Idiot!" begins a typical musical person's letter. "Everybody but you knows the Eroica is Beethoven's Third Symphony, and is not piano music."

Others insist that Mr. Horowitz must have played one of Beethoven's sonatas or piano concertos. All agree that whatever was played could not have been the Eroica and that I am too ignorant of music to be allowed to report on composers as majestic as Beethoven, Brahms and Bachman.

Well, as it says in the Book of Samuel, there is a time for all things under the sun, including a time for tolerating abuse from readers and a time for not tolerating it. Let the facts, then, speak for themselves:

At the C.I.A. we knew the music war with Moscow was heating up and expected the K.G.B. to retaliate with something fancy after we ruined the Leningrad Philharmonic's performance of Wagner's "Aida" by stuffing

their trombones with salt-water taffy Accordingly, I was assigned to keep an eye on the Horowitz concert and arrived at Carnegie Square Garden to discover that somebody had sawed the legs off the Steinmetz.

A lot of piano players would have walked out right there, but Mr. Horowitz was a good sport. "By now," I told him, "the K.G.B. has those piano legs halfway to Moscow. The only way anybody is going to get any music out of these 68 keys is by lying flat on the stage."

The only pianist athletic enough to do it, I thought, was Van Kilburn, but Mr. Horowitz insisted on giving it the old university try.

I urged him to take the easy way out by playing something short like Beethoven's "Impassionata," "Pathologique," or "Moonshine Sonata," but Mr. Horowitz said he had a musical idiosyncrasy. The only tune he could play while lying flat on the floor was Beethoven's Eroica.

"Surely," I cried, "surely you don't mean the massive Third Symphony (composed 1803-4), the landmark in cultural history which signaled a definitive break with the past and the birth of a new era, and the length, structure, harmonies and orchestration of which all broke the formal conventions of classical music?"

"The very same," he said.

To readers who tell me I know nothing of music, I say, "Were you there?"

The one person I know who actually was there is utterly untrustworthy. A C.I.A. colleague celebrated for his feats of bureaucratic well-poisoning, he tried persistently throughout my secret career in the music war to discredit me with our superiors.

After the Horowitz concert, he filed a report and naturally marked it "Eyes Only" to assure it would be widely leaked. In it, he stated that it was not Vladimir Horowitz whom I interviewed during the crisis, but a K.G.B. agent specially trained to play the piano while lying flat on his stomach.

In fact, said my rival's report, the man did not even look like Vladimir Horowitz, but strongly resembled the late Eddie Duchin, and for this reason had been sent to America years ago to corrupt college students by playing Soviet pop songs at tea dances.

Moreover, this bizarre document continued, the music he performed the night of the sawed-off piano legs sounded so little like the Eroica and so much like a medley of "Stardust," "Moonlight Cocktail" and "Pistol Packin' Mama" that the orchestra's bassoon and oboe players departed angrily during the second movement.

I cite this document to illustrate the vicious extremes to which bureaucratic cutthroats will go to discredit a colleague for their own self-promotion. The document is patently a tissue of lies, of course, for I sat through the entire concert and heard nothing that sounded the least bit like "Pistol Packin' Mama," a song I would surely have recognized, as it has always been one of my favorites, along with Mozart's "Marriage of the Barber of Seville," of course. □